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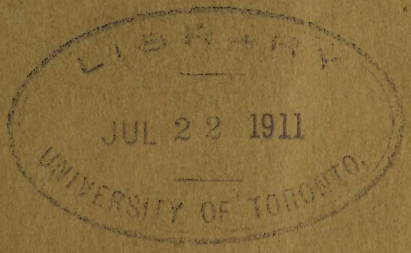
YALE UNIVERSITY PRIZE POEM

1911



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1911

THE LEGEND OF TAMALPAIS

BY

NEILL COMPTON WILSON

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PREFATORY NOTE

This poem received the fourteenth award of the prize offered by Professor Albert Stanburrough Cook to Yale University for the best unpublished verse, the Committee of Award consisting of Professor Frederick E. Pierce, of Yale University, Professor Caleb T. Winchester, of Wesleyan University, and Dr. Robert K. Root, of Princeton University.

THE LEGEND OF TAMALPAIS

[Tamalpais (pronounced Tam'-al-pice), signifying, in the language of a departed race, Land of the Tamals, is a mountain which rises prominently above San Francisco Bay, and which at morning and evening presents to the cities below the silhoueted outline of a sleeping maiden.]

Maid of the silent hills, the sea turns gray,
Over the East now gleam the threads of dawn,
Red dyes the clouds, and floods the lapping bay,
Out from the wind-swept sky the stars are gone;
Now from your couch, like folds, night's mists have drawn;
Down the long glens the shafts of sunrise creep;—
Still in a waking world you slumber on,
Heedless of day, in dreams long ages deep:
Maid of the hills, what ancient legend bids you sleep?

Flocks lay dead on the hillsides,
Forests were brown and dry,
And the sun beat over, relentless,
Fixed in a copper sky.
'O warrior chief of the Tamals,
Yield—we are sore afraid!'
'Not till the hills have melted
Will I yield up the mountain maid!'

'Yield to the wrathful sun-god!'
'Not till the sea runs dry!'
'But our flocks lie dead on the hillsides
From Rainier to Tehachepi.'
'Fit my canoe then for battle,
Fetch then my arms to me!'
Alone on the bay he ventured,
He struck for the open sea.

Far to the West he paddled,
Near the circling edge of the world,
Where rocks still jut from the ocean
That aloft at the sun he hurled;
Weary and long raged the battle,
And then rose a mighty cry,
For blood stained the heavens with crimson
From Rainier to Tehachepi.

Into the seething ocean,
Down the fast-reddening West,
Over the edge of the waters
Slipped then the sun-god to rest.
'O warrior chief of the Tamals,
Hailing, we wait for thee!'
But the maiden knelt on the hill-crest,
And strained toward the open sea.

Dark grew the lapping waters,
Fading, the hills turned gray;
Night first came to the Tamals,
Great was their new dismay.
'Lo, he has slain the sun-god;
How will his torch now burn?'
'Lo, he is lost on the ocean,
My love, and he'll ne'er return!'

So on the hill they found her,
Though in twilight the sea lay blurred;
And they spoke, and gently they shook her,
But she answered never a word.
Then under the stars' first gleaming,
With her face still turned to the West,
Alone on the darkening mountain,
They laid her away to rest.

Over the edge of the ocean
Slipped the lost warrior then,
And a goddess, rising and setting,
Trailed her white light over men;
Strange stars went out from the heavens,
Silently, one by one,
When lo, from the hills, triumphant,
Arose the resplendent sun.

Then kind Mother Nature, weeping,
Dropped over the sad land rain;
Then brooks to the sea fell splashing,
And forests turned green again.
So now burn the hills in summer,
So now weep the winter skies,
Though the Tamals long have departed
For the forests of Paradise.

Now, when the evening shadows
Long in the canyons lie,
When, o'er the darkening ocean,
Red stains the western sky,
When from the hills, at twilight,
Pine and sequoia fade,
Gently the sun-god, dying,
Kisses the sleeping maid.

So she will lie in slumber,
Turned to the darkening West,
Veiled by the mists at evening,
Softly by night caressed,
Cooled by the winds in summer,
Lashed by the winter's rain,
Till her lover, lost on the ocean,
Comes from the West again.

Maid of the mountain, sleep: the shadows fall,
Now is your age-long whispered story told;
Over your head the circling night-birds call,
Gray floods the western sky, the sea grows cold;
In from the ocean now soft mists, unrolled,
Down the long yellow hills of evening creep,
Veiling your form in purple, as of old;
Dark turn the pines, the canyon glens grow deep;
Night is at hand, and silence. Maid of the mountain, sleep.